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Health and Social Care

Disabled Children and Child Protection in Scotland: Investigation into the relationship between professional practice, child protection and disability

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This project was commissioned by the Scottish Government Children's Rights and Wellbeing Division to investigate the relationship between disabled children and child protection practice. Through interviews and focus groups the researchers spoke with 61 professionals working on issues of disabled children and child protection in Scotland.

Disabled children are more likely to be abused than their non-disabled peers, but there is evidence to suggest that the abuse of disabled children sometimes goes undetected. Getting it right for every child does not mean treating every child the same. There is a lack of confidence in working with disabled children, a lack of relevant training and variability in thresholds for action. Whilst there are positive aspects, this research shows that the child protection system is a cause for concern in relation to disabled children.

Main findings

- Assessments of child protection concerns should include and support the views of disabled children and young people where possible.
- Local services need to provide training for disability teams, speech and language therapists and others with specific disability expertise on child protection and the child protection process (including joint interviewing).
- The vulnerability of all disabled children, not just those with communication impairments, should be highlighted in practice guidance and supervision.
- Where concerns have been raised and addressed for a particular child experiencing maltreatment, detailed consideration of subsequent harm that may be posed to other children should be monitored.
- The availability and suitability of foster carers and other care arrangements for disabled children should be examined across Scotland.
- Child protection case conferences should be made accessible for the involvement of disabled children.
- All sectors should review their support to disabled children in the area of child protection to ensure best practice.
- A stronger focus on prevention of child abuse and neglect against disabled children is needed.
- Safe interagency reflective spaces should be created for discussing and learning from examples of practice related to child protection and disability.

Background

Although most parents of disabled children provide safe and loving homes, there is a significant body of international research to show that disabled children are more likely to be abused than their non-disabled peers. Despite this heightened risk, there is evidence that the abuse of disabled children often goes undetected and, even when suspected, may be under-reported.

Analysis of child protection policy across the UK has shown an invisibility of disabled children. The Scottish Government has taken steps to address this, with reference in the National Guidance to the increased vulnerability of and need for heightened protection of disabled children and establishment of a Ministerial Working Group on Child Protection and Disability.

The Study

The study used a qualitative approach to address four main questions:

1. What are the decision-making processes and ‘triggers’ for intervention used by professionals when determining the nature of interventions for disabled children at risk of significant harm?
2. What are specific issues faced by practitioners in Scotland in supporting children at risk of significant harm?
3. How do services coordinate to support disabled children at risk of significant harm?
4. What are practice examples in Scotland addressing these issues?

The study used four concurrent components to address the research questions including: Interviews with participants from six local authority areas and across five different services ($n = 21$); focus groups with Child Protection Committees ($n = 5$ with 40 participants); practice case studies; the development of systems and response models. Inductive analysis across interviews and focus groups resulted in findings within three main themes.

Theme One: The Child at the Centre?

There were positive messages about putting the child at the very heart of child protection assessment and intervention, regardless of any impairment a child may have and some practitioners had found creative ways to approach that. In other cases, though, tensions were evident between the desire to treat every child equally, and to individualise child protection successfully for disabled children. Understanding different types of impairment and associated support needs played a critical role in helping to assess the risk to the child and the possible forms of intervention. There were examples of interventions being adapted in order to support

individual disabled children, for example the venue, pacing and materials used in joint interviews, but this was by no means universal.

The implications of communication impairments received prominent attention: these were said to prevent practitioners from being able to gain adequately the child’s perspective and hinder accurate information gathering. Nonetheless there were examples of many successful adaptations, suggesting these difficulties may be perceived rather than real. Indeed, there were a number of cases of children making a direct disclosure, including children with communication impairments. However, the perception of impairments making children unreliable witnesses led to disclosures not always being treated the same as those made by a child without an impairment. Given the difficulties participants reported when working with disabled children, there was also concern that practice was at times parent-centred rather than child-centred.

Theme Two: Practice Issues (Muddling Through)

The issues arising from working with disabled children in the child protection system meant that some participants appeared to be ‘muddling through’¹. The data revealed a lack of confidence among many participants when working with disabled children. While some social workers had received training in communication with disabled children, others reported a lack of relevant training available along with high staff workloads, perceiving work with disabled children as requiring specialist knowledge and much time. There was a debate about whether or not there should be separate children’s disability teams or whether these should be integrated into generic children’s teams. Perceived thresholds of significant risk and when to intervene varied, with different views among participants over whether thresholds were the same, lower, or higher for disabled children compared to other young people.

Theme Three: Interagency Working

All participants reported high levels of interagency working and saw this as inherently positive, bringing significant benefits, although they recognised some failings and tensions. Communication and co-operation was one area in particular that was seen as having improved in recent years, tied to the improvements the majority also felt existed in relation to information sharing and the co-ordination of services. Social Work was often seen by other agencies as having higher thresholds and concerns were expressed by some practitioners that particular children were left in neglectful or risky circumstances for too long. Health and social services were frustrated by the standard of evidence needed by police and courts for criminal prosecutions.

¹ Cited in interview

Discussion

Several tensions were highlighted in relation to establishing and maintaining a child-centred approach for disabled children at risk of significant harm. Overall, there was a strong commitment by practitioners to the principles of *Getting it Right for Every Child*, yet significant barriers in practice were identified to ensuring disabled children were consulted, informed and had the opportunity to give their views about decisions affecting them. The positive emphasis on child centeredness potentially leads to invisibility of disabled children. Efforts to treat every child the same may mean crucial contextual and vulnerability factors are missed. A perception of disabled children as lacking ability and agency often preceded discussions about the inability to gather children's views or involve them in discussions around child protection concerns. However, other practitioners recognised and respected disabled children's rights and abilities to express their views and contribute to decision-making, and had taken appropriate steps to facilitate this. There was anxiety about 'getting it wrong' for example, failing to recognise significant harm. This was also cited as a reason why some practitioners failed to involve disabled children in the process.

Interagency working was identified as a potential enabler to overcoming lack of individual knowledge and confidence in working with disabled children. The current fiscal climate of fewer resources without diminishing demand was raised as a potential challenge, especially in relation to disabled children and their families who may require additional support.

Implications and Recommendations

The National Child Protection Guidance (2010) on working with disabled children highlighted seven key messages for practice. This research shows these are still relevant. It is clear that more training and guidance in the area of child protection and disability is needed, including disability training for child protection professionals, child protection training for children's disability teams and communication training for all staff whose job brings them into contact with children with communication impairments. This study also identified additional recommendations for policy and practice.

Conclusion

There is whole-hearted commitment across the child protection system for putting the child at the centre. However, getting it right for every child does not mean treating every child the same. Consideration needs to be given to how best to adapt practice, assessment and intervention for children with a range of impairments. A lack of confidence suggests that practitioners are often 'muddling through' when it comes to working with disabled children. Child protection workers require more training regarding disability, and children's disability teams need more training about child protection. Interagency working was regarded positively and was seen as an enabler to good practice. However, thresholds for action in the child protection system are higher for disabled children than for non-disabled children. More needs to be done to ensure their voices are heard and included within formal systems. Whilst there are positive aspects, this research shows that the child protection system is a cause for concern in relation to disabled children.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131 244 2111.

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